

Today is a sad day for Lemon Grove

When I decided to run for a seat on the city council, I wanted to help improve City Hall so that it could serve the residents of this fine community with the respect, honesty, advocacy, and quality of government that they deserve. For too long the city's leaders had overpromised and under delivered. I wanted to change that and campaigned on a promise to be fully transparent, work hard, and put the needs of this community before my own.

Every day since taking my oath of office I have done just that- for the benefit of the public and nobody else. I do not aspire to higher office and this job is not a stepping stone for me. Serving as your elected representative is my one and only job. My sole objective in serving on this City Council is doing everything within my power to leave Lemon Grove better than my constituents think it was when I arrived. Representing you is a full time privilege.

Unfortunately I have been under attack from the beginning. One line of attack has come from the Mayor herself. The other line of attack has come from all four of my other colleagues on the City Council with support from the City Manager, City Attorney and other high level officials.

Let me start with the attacks on me by the Mayor.

At my very first council meeting, I was repeatedly disrespected by the Mayor. I responded by sending an email to her, the City Manager and to the City Attorney on December 17th 2020, to request that all of us get on zoom to discuss how to improve communications at City Council meetings. I wrote: "The conversation would be about healthy and appropriate ways of communicating with one another during city council meetings, and in working together in general. I am requesting this meeting be given timely priority in order to avoid potential workplace issues moving forward." Although I did make suggestions to the Mayor afterward for improving our communications, it did no good.

A couple months later, during a February meeting that she and I attended at City Hall, her purse was resting on a table and I reached for it to move it a couple feet to make space for the binder and laptop in my arms. The mayor immediately rushed toward me, got right up in my face, started yelling at me, and was so quickly and physically aggressive I believed she was about to hit me. Fearing for my safety, I stepped back out of arms' reach and then filed a police report. To this day the police have never told me the outcome of their investigation.

In May of last year, the Mayor and I were volunteering at a food-bank event. Apparently upset that I was attempting to load a bag of groceries into someone's vehicle, she approached me suddenly from behind, and began to berate me. Again her hostile demeanor made me fearful for my safety and I again reported the incident to people in charge of the event, including one of my colleagues on City Council. And once again, nothing came of it.

And just last week I filed a formal grievance against the Mayor because she was videotaping me during a closed-session meeting without obtaining permission and subsequently appeared to be videotaping me in the women's restroom at City Hall again without permission. Rather than informing me that the matter would be investigated, the City Attorney informed me that tonight's meeting would take place for the purpose of censuring me for my alleged misconduct.

So the first problem for me has been having to work, unprotected, with a Mayor who has verbally and physically threatened and intimidated me on more than one occasion, with nobody in a position of authority doing anything about it.

The second problem at City Hall also started right around my first day on the job. My colleagues on the City Council, with the assistance of the City Manager, Assistant City Manager, the City Clerk, and the City Attorney, do not want the public to know the truth about what they are doing on your behalf with your tax dollars.

Some of you have seen the push-back I receive during public meetings. The City's top officials do not want me to be able to ask questions or speak my mind because they are afraid of what the public will learn in the process. For example, I have been shut down repeatedly by the Mayor when I was trying to gather information from staff, initiate a dialogue about what's in the best interest of the public, or improve the decisions we were being asked to make. The City Council has authorized the expenditure of tens of thousands of dollars to adopt new rules designed to keep me silent and keep the public in the dark. Officials at the highest levels have withheld accurate information and spread misinformation in order to marginalize the work I do on my constituents behalf. Most recently, the Mayor reprimanded me for saying "thank you" to a member of the public who took the time to attend a council meeting and provide public testimony.

But the public sees only the tip of the iceberg. The other members of the City Council aided by top staff members, hold illegal private meetings for the purpose of formulating their strategy for silencing me as your representative. They fabricate stories about misconduct. They send me misleading, dishonest memos and then threaten legal action against me if I share the contents with my constituents. They hire friends to conduct so-called "neutral" investigations but refuse to let me see the investigator's report or respond to allegations.

A couple months ago, I filed a formal grievance against the City Manager and the City Attorney because, when I criticized their professional performance, they mistreated and maligned me instead of responding to the merits of my criticisms. I have not been informed of any results of that grievance. I do not even know whether the City Council investigated it.

The public needs to understand what is happening here. While on the surface it appears that four members of the City Council have an axe to grind with me, the reality is that my colleagues have an axe to grind with you.

The questions I ask when I'm on the dais and between Council meetings are based on requests from my constituents and other members of the public who want to have a better understanding of why the City does this or that. When I criticize the performance of City officials, I do so because I have seen with my own eyes that my constituents are being mistreated, lied to, deceived, and disrespected. When I question the wisdom of policies that the City is pursuing, it is because my constituents have raised legitimate concerns about the adverse consequences that they will suffer as a result. When I speak out against my colleagues' misconduct and bad decisions, I am expressing frustrations that my constituents have shared with me.

In other words, my colleagues on the City Council and other top City officials do not like what I'm doing on your behalf or how I am doing it. They are trying to shut me down because they do not like the work that I am doing for you as members of the public.

Let me give you three specific examples.

In the first example, I asked the City Manager to provide supporting documentation for several of the large expenditures I was being asked to approve. The City Manager told me that providing the documentation would be a "burden on staff." Can you imagine having to sign a large check to someone without being able to see what the payment was for? I can't, but that is what I have to deal with.

In the second example, I asked the City Manager for copies of the City Attorney's bills because I want to know what the taxpayer-funded lawyers are doing on the City's behalf and how much it is costing us. The City Manager refused to provide me with copies of the bills and, after extensive back-and-forth negotiations, said that I could only review copies with a chaperone present. Since I am technically one of the clients for purposes of overseeing what the City Attorney does, it makes no sense that I cannot have a copy of the bills. Can you imagine if you asked your attorney for a copy of the bill and the staff said "no?" I can't, but that is what I have to deal with.

In the third example, I come to City Hall regularly to meet with constituents, to study City materials so that I know what questions to ask and what suggestions to make to improve policy proposals, and to carry out my fiduciary duties to the voters and taxpayers. Looking out for the best interests of my constituents is a full-time job, and I treat it that way. I use an empty conference room and keep to myself, except of course to say "hi" to people I pass in the hallway. However, the City Manager and the City Attorney have informed me that I am not welcome at City Hall except during official City Council Meetings and the City Attorney recently threatened to seek a court order to prevent me from coming to City Hall. Can you imagine being on the board of directors of a multi-million-dollar business, responsible to the shareholders for everything that the business does, but being told by its management that you cannot come to the office without an invitation? I can't, but that is what I have to deal with.

Every one of my Council colleagues has presided over the City's persistent financial crisis without fully investigating and reporting the real reasons for our near bankruptcy. The sales tax that they supported, and I mistakenly supported, in 2020, I have since come to learn was not meant to improve the City's financial situation but to cover up the severity of the problem without fixing the mismanagement and corruption that got us into the problem in the first place. Sadly, City leaders continue to cover up our financial problems even today.

On the public's behalf, I have been alone in asking lots of tough questions to get to the bottom of the financial crisis. The City's top officials have been stonewalling me from the beginning and today they are taking it to a new level. Make no mistake they are trying to cancel the results of an election. Their goal is to leave the residents of Lemon Grove without a pro-transparency, anti-corruption advocate by silencing me.

One of the baseless accusations against me tonight is that I do not follow proper procedures during Council meetings. I am not a lawyer so I have asked the City Attorney on many occasions to help me do my job in a manner that follows the rules. On more than one occasion she has told me that she can only do that sort of thing if the majority of the Council authorizes her to do so- and that has not happened.

Even though I am not a lawyer, however, I can read. The Mayor likes to cite Lemon Grove Municipal Code Section 2.14.160, which prohibits members of the Council from delaying or interrupting the proceedings or the peace of the City Council, disturbing another council member when speaking, or refusing to obey the orders of the City Council or the Mayor "except as otherwise provided in this chapter."

Nearby in the same chapter, Lemon Grove Municipal Code Section 22.14.130 states: "Any council member may have the reasons for that councilmember's dissent from or protest against any action of the city council entered into the record and the minutes."

What I have been doing, consistent with the Municipal Code, has been lodging on the record for the public's benefit the reasons for my dissent and my protest against the misconduct and misinformation spread during Council meetings. My colleagues on the Council do not like my message and, rather than responding on the merits, are trying to kill the messenger.

Now I will be the first person to tell you that I am not perfect and there are things I can improve upon. I am passionate about looking after the people of Lemon Grove and the larger Lemon Grove community. I do not sugarcoat bad news. And my choice of words often reflects the level of disrespect, dishonesty, and corruption that I see committed by the City's leaders against the people.

For instance, the other four members of the Council and the City Attorney recently attempted to keep me from attending a closed-session meeting even though it is my job to attend and I had every right to be there. What I witnessed was truly disgusting and I said "Are you guys insane? You're acting like a bunch of fucking buffoons." I felt like I was in the Twilight zone, being attacked and cornered by a vicious mob, in cahoots to do wrong and my words matched the moment.

If my colleagues on Council or anyone else has misinterpreted my passion for personal animosity, I am deeply sorry for that and I apologize. I have nothing personal against anyone at City Hall. My concerns and criticisms relate exclusively to what certain people are doing in their official, professional capacities and not with anyone as a private person. In the future, if someone has an issue with something that I've said or the way that I've said it, the adult approach is to bring it to my attention right then and there so that we can make sure we understand each other and, If I'm wrong, so that I can apologize and modify my behavior.

I will apologize right now to all the people who came down here tonight under false pretenses. Anticipating the community support for the work I am doing, my colleagues have taken a low road, knowing very well that I stand with uplifting and supporting my fellow brothers and sisters of color, and instead they have tried to do what our suppressors have done for centuries and that's to pit us against one another. But let us not be fooled. My colleagues and upper level City officials want to tear us apart to deflect from the fraud, corruption, mismanagement and waste I am exposing. All of which has hurt us and kept us down. I've been exposing the damage the more I witness, the more I discover and the more I see how it has hurt us. Back in 1931 the Hispanic parents of this community stood up against dishonest and corrupt city officials and I am here as the first elected Latina to our city council to do the same because the people of our city won't be kept down for lack of a courageous advocate any longer.

Over the weekend I saw a social media post made by one of the supporters of the three Democrats on the Council, and it claimed that I used racist language toward my colleagues. That is false, and hopefully my comments tonight cleared that up. I'm here to fight for us, not hurt us.

But I want to be equally clear about something: I will not apologize for putting the people of Lemon Grove first, for being a tenacious advocate for what I believe to be in their best interests, or for doing my homework so that I can be that advocate. City Hall is precisely the place where we should be able to have vigorous, passionate, informed debates that include meaningful public participation. My mother is a house cleaner and her ability to provide for her children as we grew up rested on her clients' ability to trust her to do the right thing when no one was watching. She instilled in my sisters and me the importance of having integrity. And I want to be clear; I will not go along with secrecy, dishonesty, misinformation, corruption, or fraud.

I appreciate every single one of you who is out here tonight showing your passion, your heart, your determination to be involved. Please know I am committed to being la voz de la gente, committed to working for you, no matter what.

If you agree, please let my colleagues on the City Council know.